

Imperium sine fine? Rome in Scotland

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Jupiter may have promised Rome an ‘empire without end’, but some people at the edges of the Roman world thought differently. Studying, and reconstructing, the material remains of Roman border territory can show us Roman power stretched to its limits.

Where did the Roman empire end? This is a question that ancient historians have asked, and answered, in different ways; it’s a useful line of enquiry as thinking about it opens up a range of further questions about the nature, aims, and impact of the Roman imperial presence in the provinces. Sometimes there was a clear demarcation line between Roman territory and the world beyond. Hadrian’s Wall, which features elsewhere in this issue in Natalya Kahn’s prize essay, is the most famous example (though as we will see it is not as straightforward as it might seem). Rivers, like the Rhine or Elbe in Germany, or mountain ranges could form a natural barrier marking the edge of Roman control, but not always: sometimes, as in parts of the eastern or southern desert frontiers of the empire, there was no clear defining border feature. It is not clear whether Roman emperors and their advisers had anything like a modern map with boundaries drawn in, and unlikely that people living in marginal bits of the empire would have thought in those terms.

So what signs of a Roman presence could you look for? Would it be evident in the way that people dressed, or spoke, or the goods they traded, or from the presence of Roman soldiers or Roman-style buildings? Sometimes these factors could be present but not universal, or not a sign of direct Roman control; you might find some of them in places outside the formal bounds of the empire, in trading outposts or allied kingdoms. Both inside and outside the empire, some groups in society might adopt Roman habits, while others might resist them or show less interest. For example, Britain before Claudius’ invasion of A.D. 43 was already nominally subject to Rome – Julius Caesar had agreed a treaty with some of its tribal kings nearly a hundred years before – but the actual impact of Rome in social, political, and cultural terms varied very widely according to where in the British Isles you

were looking, and who you were looking at.

The ends of the earth – Hadrian’s Wall and beyond

Scotland, at the northern extreme of Rome’s empire, provides a very good example. Large areas of Scotland were at times subject to Rome, and many fascinating Roman remains have been found there. The story of the Romans in Scotland raises some interesting questions: what factors determined whether Rome tried to bring an area under her control? What means did she use to do so, and what trace did they leave? And for those who like counterfactual, ‘what-if’ history, there are several important turning points where things might have gone differently.

Although Hadrian’s Wall, pictured below, famously divides Roman Britain from ‘barbarian’ Scotland, the reality is actually rather more complicated. For a start, the function of the Wall is not fully understood and seems to have changed in its design phase and then over its lifespan, acting rather more like a customs barrier or control point than a definite marker of the edge of the empire. The territory to the north of the Wall was not a unified ‘Scotland’, but inhabited by a variety of tribes – the geographer Ptolemy identified 18 – who spoke Celtic languages and lived in round houses of timber or stone. Some of these tribes were keen to trade and deal with Rome, others less so. The Wall channelled their movement into overseable, controllable, and taxable patterns, but does not seem to have been intended to keep them out entirely: it has regular gateways.

Moreover, the Wall, impressive as it is, marks only certain phases of Roman operations in northern Britain. It dates from the early 120s A.D., a time when the new emperor Hadrian was interested in fixing the boundaries of the empire after prob-

lems encountered by his expansionist predecessor Trajan. But four decades earlier the Roman army had sought to extend its control far to the north of this line, marching round the north-eastern coast of Scotland towards and beyond Aberdeen. Evidence of their progress can be seen in the bumpy fields at Inchtuthil in a bend of the river Tay. Here in about A.D. 82 the Roman governor Agricola built a huge legionary fort for the twentieth legion, the Legio XX Valeria Victrix, to act as a base for his push onwards and northwards. Little remains to be seen on the surface except extensive ditches and hummocks in the fields, but careful excavation and comparison to other sites allows us to build up a fair picture of what was once there. Covering over twenty hectares, the fort contained a hospital, workshop, headquarters, and 64 barrack blocks for over 5,000 men. The digital reconstruction, above, that I made for a recent BBC documentary on the subject shows the size and impressive appearance of the fort, a determined statement of Roman power, and helps translate the archaeology of the site – which now consists of hummocky fields and different coloured stains in the soil where wooden posts once sat – into a visual representation of how the fort once appeared.

A strange reversal

At first everything went according to plan: the legionaries, rested and supplied from this new base at Inchtuthil, marched north and dealt the natives a decisive defeat at the battle of Mons Graupius in A.D. 83 or 84. But then something odd happened. Instead of consolidating their victory, the Romans carefully dismantled their laboriously-built fort and retreated south. The archaeology seems to show that the fort was only in use for a few years, and that some buildings were never completed; a huge cache of over 750,000 iron nails (now studied by nuclear engineers interested in the degradation of buried metal over time) indicates that the Romans dismantled the fort’s buildings and hid the iron to stop the locals from using it. This tactic worked, as the fort was never reused and whatever settlement had started to grow up around it seems not to have devel-

oped into a town. The Roman historian Tacitus mentions this retreat and attributes it to the wicked emperor Domitian's jealousy of Agricola's success. A more credible reason might be the revolt of tribes in distant Dacia, modern Romania, causing a reorganization of Roman forces and the abandonment of further conquest in Scotland – only marginally valuable to Rome – in favour of Dacia's strategic value and metal mines.

Either way, this retreat marks an important moment, when the momentum and rationale of northwards expansion begun by Claudius' invasion in A.D. 43 came to a halt. Had Dacia not revolted, or had Domitian not grown jealous, it is possible that Inchtuthil would have stayed under occupation. As many towns in Britain – Exeter, Lincoln, York – grew up around Roman forts, these low-lying fields on the Tay might also have grown into a great city, perhaps even the capital of Scotland. But now they are inhabited only by cows.

The other Roman Wall in the north

By A.D. 122 Hadrian had made the retreat permanent with his Wall. Or had he? Only twenty years later the Roman army moved north again under the new emperor, Antoninus Pius. A new wall was built along the naturally defensible Forth–Clyde isthmus, with regular forts built along its line as they had been along Hadrian's; Antoninus was attempting to move the whole line of Roman control northwards, perhaps responding to local unrest or attempting to snatch some military glory for himself. For a generation or two Scotland south of this line was in the empire again, and Roman-style towns like Inveresk, with its fort, bathhouse, straight streets, amphitheatre-like arena, and parade ground must for a time have seemed (at least to some natives) like the way of the future. But once again this attempt proved short-lived – after another twenty years the legions pulled up their buildings and marched south, back to Hadrian's Wall. For those locals who were by now invested in the power structures and lifestyle of the Romans, this must have seemed a disaster; for others, a liberation.

Forty years later another imperial dynasty was in power, and needed to assert its military credentials. Unrest among the border tribes, which had by now been rumbling on for nearly a century, provided a pretext for action. In A.D. 208 Septimius Severus' legions headed north for yet another attempt to reduce Scotland. Again archaeology tells the story (alongside our literary sources). Carefully buried hoards of Severan coins at Birnie suggest attempts to buy off some of the more flexible locals. The huge marching camp at St Leonard's, now invisible on the surface but reconstructed below from archaeo-

logy and comparison to literary sources on Roman military camp construction, shows us what a Roman army on the march could do: this entire camp was probably thrown up overnight, used once, and left behind as the legions marched on. However, Severus died on campaign in A.D. 211 and the momentum of his advance petered out as his sons squabbled over the succession. This time there were to be no more Roman attempts to conquer Scotland, though continued coin and artefact finds suggest an uneasy peace brokered by strategic bribery of favoured factions and tribes.

One step forward, one step back

Viewed over this timescale the Roman imperial presence in Scotland starts to look not like an unstoppable military machine, but more like the ebb and flow of regular tides, as conditions elsewhere in the empire and the political needs of new emperors dictated an opportunistic advance or a realistic retreat. The marginal attractiveness of Scotland as a conquest – not rich or threatening enough to demand permanent settlement, but a tempting target when opportunity offered – in combination with the harshness of its landscape, its distance from Roman centres of command and resources, and (especially if you ask Scots) the fierce resistance of its native inhabitants, meant that it ultimately eluded permanent Roman rule.

With the privilege of two millennia of hindsight it is easy to see these grand patterns, and perhaps to think that it was inevitable that things worked out in a certain way. At times over those years, though, the future would have been far from clear, and the Roman empire would have represented many different things to different inhabitants of what we now call Scotland: threat, opportunity, civilization, destruction, safety, danger. On the Roman side, the complexities of these repeated advances and retreats suggest that the actual business of extending imperial rule was messier than any ideologically-driven dream of empire stretching to the ends of the earth, and that cold realities tended to overcome sporadic, politically-motivated thrusts for glory. History can look different depending on where you stand.

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